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In need of more sophisticated Internet tools. (Cornell University Legal
   Information Institute's Cello 1.0; Spry Inc.'s Air Series)
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ABSTRACT: Several product are available that offer Internet tools under a
common interface. Cornell University Legal Information Institute's free
Cello 1.0 offers access to Internet services under an all-in-one interface.
The World Wide Web (WWW) browser enables user to connect to Gopher, FTP and
the Wide Area Information Server, as well as WWW servers, via a common
interface. The software fails at odd times, however, and users are required
to install separate support programs that Cello calls to display graphics,
play sound and run multimedia files. Spry Inc's Air Series, which is priced
from $149 to $399, incorporates an FTP applet, electronic mail (E-mail), a
Telnet terminal emulator and a news reader, as well as a Gopher query tool
and other programs that enable users to set up FTP and RCP (remote copy
program) servers and print over the network. A raft of NNTP news readers is
also discussed.

TEXT:
     With all the press about the rich information repositories available
free of charge on the Internet, it's unfortunate that there aren't more
easy-to-drive vehicles available to make the trip smoother for end users.
     A variety of Internet services are out there, and most commercial
vendors of Internet-access tools simply bundle a bunch of little applets
that tackle specific functions; for example, one program accesses Gopher
servers, another transfers files to and from remote systems, and yet
another sends and receives mail. Traditionally, however, each applet is
wrapped in a different user interface.
     Bucking this trend is the Cornell University Legal Information
Institute's Cello 1.0, a free product released last month that provides
access to a variety of Internet services under an all-in-one interface.
     Taking the stereotypical approach is commercial vendor Spry Inc.'s
Air Series, a 2-month-old Windows-based set of Internet-access tools that
employs separate interfaces for each tool. But because the interfaces don't
really differ much, we wonder why the whole package doesn't reside under
one big user interface. The Air Series costs from $149 to $399, depending
on the number of applications purchased.
     Spry just took steps to correct that situation -- at press time, the
firm announced that it had purchased the rights to NCSA Mosaic, a World
Wide Web browser developed by the University of Illinois at
Champaign-Urbana that offers several Internet tools under one interface.
Bravo.
     PC Week Labs ran both Cello 1.0 and Spry's Air Series on a daily
basis over a two-month period (we began examining Cello during its beta
stage), using a direct LAN connection to the Internet via Frontier
Technology Inc.'s SuperTCP 3.0 TCP/IP stack. These tools, and others like
them, require the use of WINSOCK.DLL, also known as Microsoft Corp.'s
Windows Sockets 1.1.
     Navigating the Air Series
     Spry's Air Series, released in January, combines an FTP applet,
E-mail, Telnet terminal emulator, news reader, and Gopher query tool, along
with other programs that let users set up FTP and RCP (remote copy program)
servers and print over the network. These applets -- along with those from
Frontier Technologies Corp. NetManage Inc., Beame & Whiteside Software
Ltd., and others -- perform reliably, but present users, as well as IS and
training managers, with extra work.
     Beyond the complexities of setting up TCP/IP on workstations and

getting the TCP/IP stack to work with their LAN, administrators also must teach users how to negotiate each of the little programs.

In terms of functionality, the Air Series programs such as Gopher and FTP don't vary much from those offered by other vendors (see related story, Page N/1).

The one standout is the Air Series' FTP applet, which resembles and interacts well with Windows File Manager. Users can open File Manager concurrently with the FTP program -- a good idea, because it lets them send and receive files using familiar drag-and-drop methods. This convenient approach beats out most Windows-based FTP programs, such as the one found in Frontier's Super-TCP package, which forces users to re-key several repetitive commands every session.

NetManage's ChameleonNFS 4.0 contains an FTP applet that comes close to what we'd like to see in every package -- graphical and textual progress reports, a configuration file that holds a list of commonly accessed FTP sites, and a function that downloads text files from sites and displays them on-screen (without having to invoke the file-save function).

Of the other applets within the Air Series -- among them, a Gopher-access program, Telnet terminal emulator, and mail **program** with a UU **encoder** and **decoder** utility -- only Spry's Gopher **program** is truly lacking. It could use an informative progress indicator --the "We're working on it" icon is no more than a modified cursor arrow. During time-consuming searches, it would be nice to know what the program is doing.

Cello's one-stop interface

Users need a single interface to access the Internet's varied resources. Version 1.0 of Cello, a freeware product developed by Thomas R. Bruce of Cornell University's Legal Information Institute, is a mostly successful attempt.

This WWW (World Wide Web) browser allows users to connect to Gopher, FTP, the Wide Area Information Server, and WWW servers with a minimum of fuss, using a common interface.

Unfortunately -- and this goes for most free, Windows-based Internet-access software -- Cello has some bugs. It fails at odd times, often when synchronizing with Gopher servers. (Version 1.01a, released last week, reportedly fixes some problems.)

Cello's downside is that, in addition to **downloading** or converting the **program** files to FTP, **users** must install separate support programs that Cello calls to display graphics, such as on-line graphics-interchange-format files and Postscript-formatted documents. It also uses them to play sound and run multimedia files. These support files will be made available on ZiffNet.

What about news readers?

As an example of how small software developers are winning the ease-of-use war in their Internet tools, PC Week Labs also looked at a raft of NNTP news readers. A few commercial packages throw in a news reader, but the best implementations come from freeware authors.

Trumpet for Windows, from Peter Tattam, available on CompuServe and many FTP sites, is exceptionally easy to use and, arguably, the best Windows-based news reader.

As with other news readers, it lets users select a subset of the thousands of Internet news groups, subscribe or cancel a subscription at will, sort news messages on a variety of criteria (such as by date, author, and subject thread), and archive messages without having to save each message as a separate text file. The latter feature is handy, as most news readers require users to save individual messages to disk.

Another free program, WinVN, developed at NASA and also available via FTP, goes one step further than Trumpet for Windows by letting users keep several news groups open on the screen simultaneously. WinVN's unique, built-in MAPI and VIM support is handy for corporate users who want to respond to news messages via their company's LAN-based E-mail software.

WinVN harbors a few drawbacks, however. The most notable drawback is that it doesn't allow the user to "hide" read messages as does Trumpet for Windows. In addition, finding and subscribing to news groups can be time-consuming.

Both programs let users sort news-group messages, but WinVN is much

faster at it than Trumpet for Windows.

Spry's Air News is reminiscent of other market offerings, such as the Frontier, NetManage, and Beame & Whiteside implementations. Users can set up custom subsets of news groups defined by category, which is convenient. However, Air News doesn't provide message-sorting capabilities.

Replying to news messages via E-mail is handled by Air Mail, Spry's Internet-supplied mail application.

Decode depression

Often, UU-encoded binary files are available in news groups, and they are posted in a series of messages, each message containing a sequential piece of the encoded file. Each of the tested news readers had a different -- but not always successful -- method of downloading, saving, and decoding these files.

WinVN's approach is the most ambitious: A built-in UU-coding utility automatically acts upon the downloaded messages, trying to combine the sequential files into one file (usually a compressed binary). The messages often are flanked by complicated ASCII message headers. WinVN attempts to separate the extraneous material and work directly on the embedded code (which is also in ASCII format). Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

When it didn't, we resorted to a manual technique that Trumpet for Windows demands: Save the messages in a file, delete the message headers and other non-coded material, and run a separate **decode   program** to assemble the resulting file.

Spry's package is bundled with a stand-alone UU-code utility that interacts, to varying degrees, with Spry's TCP/IP applets. In Air Mail, for example, users can drag and drop E-mail messages and watch them decode automatically. In Air News, though, the process is practically inscrutable. There is no built-in decode utility, so users must save the sequential messages as files (a la Trumpet for Windows).

Unlike Trumpet for Windows, though, Spry's messages cannot be appended to the same file. The result involves stitching together coded messages using a text editor, and then running the decode utility.

Spry, of Seattle, can be reached at (206) 447-0300. Cello, WinVN, and Trumpet for Windows can be downloaded from ZiffNet on CompuServe.

COMPANY NAMES: Spry Inc.--Products
INDUSTRY CODES/NAMES: CMPT   Computers and Office Automation
DESCRIPTORS: Network software--Design and construction; Computer software
  industry--Products
PRODUCT/INDUSTRY NAMES: 7372620 (Networking Software Pkgs)
SIC CODES: 7372 Prepackaged software; 7373 Computer integrated systems
  design
TRADE NAMES: Spry Air Series for Cable (Database access software)--Design
  and construction
FILE SEGMENT: CD File 275
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